

‘Mr. Peabody & Sherman’ Hindered by Extra Sidekick

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 7, 2014 - 7:49pm

- [20th Century Fox Films](#) [2]
- [Allison Janney](#) [3]
- [David Fowle](#) [4]
- [Dennis Haysbert](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jay Ward](#) [7]
- [Lake Bell](#) [8]
- [Leslie Mann](#) [9]
- [Max Charles](#) [10]
- [Mel Brooks](#) [11]
- [Movie Review](#) [12]
- [Mr. Peabody & Sherman](#) [13]
- [Patrick Warburton](#) [14]
- [Stanley Tucci](#) [15]
- [Stephen Colbert](#) [16]
- [Ty Burrell](#) [17]



Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Talking dogs have been around for decades in animated movies and television shows, especially the anthropomorphized kind. From the superhero antics of Underdog to the biting sarcasm from the likes of Brian from “Family Guy” - take your pick and you can find a dog to your liking. I always took a shine to Mr. Peabody, the intelligent and resourceful beagle with a penchant for puns...who had appeared in misadventurous time-traveling shorts on “The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show” with his pal Sherman. But that doesn’t mean I was looking forward to DreamWorks Animation’s updated take on these characters for a new 3D computer-animated feature-length film.

From the trailers, it seemed like the quirky wry comic timing of Jay Ward and Ted Key (respectively, the producer and creator of “Peabody’s Improbable History”) was getting swallowed by big action/adventure sequences and dumbed-down humor. Sure enough, while there is a hint of the swift comedy and silly good-nature from the animated segments, “Mr. Peabody & Sherman” suffers from a screenplay that plays it safe. The result is a movie that could’ve benefited from relying more on the tone of the source material.

Deemed “the most extraordinary dog in the world”, super genius Mr. Peabody (splendidly voiced Ty Burrell) lives atop New York City in an elaborate penthouse with his adopted son, red-headed Sherman (Max Charles, last seen as young Peter Parker in “The Amazing Spider-Man”). You read that right. In case you’d forgotten (don’t worry, I did too) seven year-old Sherman is the adopted boy of this sophisticated and inventive (he created Autotune and the Zumba) dog. It’s a clever switcheroo that becomes kind of a big deal (too much of one, actually) and a source of contention for poor Sherman. You’d think that if the people noticing Peabody is a talking brainiac dog, they wouldn’t have a problem with the Nobel laureate and two-time Olympic medalist raising a boy.



Sherman (voice of Max Charles) Catches a Ride with Mr. Peabody (Ty Burrell) in 'Mr. Peabody & Sherman'

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Problems do arise, because our heroes need an antagonist and we meet an annoyingly nasty one on Sherman's first day of school. Her name is Penny Peterson (Ariel Winter), a classmate who becomes jealous of Sherman when he unknowingly shows off his knowledge of American history. It's not Sherman's fault he's learned history first-hand by traveling back in time in the WABAC machine (get it?), created by Mr. Peabody. Nevertheless, a cycle of retaliation begins when Penny humiliates Sherman by calling him a dog (apparently, everyone knows who his father is) and, in turn, Sherman bites the bully. Clearly, this is a kid who would've been better off getting home-schooled.

This altercation finds abrasive child services worker, Mrs. Grunyon (Allison Janney) called in to assess whether or not Peabody is a good influence and a fitting provider. To make amends, Peabody invites Grunyon and Penny's parents, Paul (Stephen Colbert) and Patty (Leslie Mann), over for dinner. As the parents socialize, Sherman and Penny are left to entertain each other, which results in the snooty girl coercing Sherman to take her on a forbidden excursion in the WABAC machine. Expectedly, the two get in over their heads and soon a frustrated Mr. Peabody finds himself bopping around the timestream attempting precise damage control.

Throughout the movie, especially the trio's unplanned time travel excursions, screenwriter Craig Wright reiterates an emphasis on the father and son dynamic between Mr. Peabody and Sherman. As a father, Peabody is having trouble letting go and giving Sherman room to grow up and as a son, the once-obedient Sherman is now exercising rebellion, brought on by Penny's deliberate coercion. Thus, heavy-handed drama and (supposed) hilarity ensue. These over-emphasized themes overshadow the true entertainment value of watching Mr. Peabody and Sherman influence historical figures and get out of tight spots that the original creation was known for. There's definitely a need for more zaniness than there is the schmaltz on display here.

It leads me to believe that something happened along the long road to see Peabody and Sherman on the big-screen. It's been over ten years since the process began, with at one point Robert Downey Jr. attached to voice Peabody (that might've been distracting considering how Burrell disappears into the role). A live-action/animation approach was considered with the possibility of resurrecting the entire Rocky and Bullwinkle property, even though that was poorly attempted not too long ago.

All the while, CalArts and Disney alum Rob Minkoff (co-director of "The Lion King" and "Stuart Little") was on board to helm the picture. What Minkoff does best here is provide us with a depiction of a truly calm Peabody in the face of seemingly inescapable situations. There's a nice animated touch that literally maps out the resourceful dog's exit strategy in a clever manner, but that style is jettisoned for the required poop and fart humor that bogs down almost every animated feature these days. It's unfortunate that Minkoff relies so blatantly on short-lived laughs, resulting in laborious pains instead of a noticeable labor of love.



Penny (Leslie Mann) Runs with the Title Characters in ‘Mr. Peabody & Sherman’

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Instead of Peabody and Sherman assisting historical types, we find the two fumbling their way in and out of specific moments in the past. They come across as interlopers instead of sources of inspiration. Most of the laughs during the historical encounters comes from the inspired voice talent of the cast, instead of the characters they portray. It’s a hoot hearing Stanley Tucci as Leonardo DiVinci getting frustrated with Mona Lisa’s (amusingly voiced by Lake Bell) smile. The inestimable Patrick Warburton can’t be missed as King Agamemnon, yet the characterization resorts to loudness and body odor humor. There are also fun blink-and-you’ll-miss-them offerings from the likes of Stephen Tobolowsky, Mel Brooks and Dennis Haysbert, in bit parts. Again, some fine talent on display, but much of what they’re asked to do is groan-worthy.

The biggest problem I had was the distasteful choice to write Penny as a thoroughly repulsive character. She’s a one-note, selfish Mean Girl who plagues the sweet-centered Sherman. It’s bad enough that Sherman is given an insistent crush on the vindictive brat, but seeing the duo go out of their way to save her irredeemable butt over and over again was absolutely frustrating.

After suffering through the wretched “Free Birds” last fall and this past January’s “The Nut Job”, both of which were bland and boring, this movie is a more enjoyable experience. But considering the creativity and cleverness of the recent “The LEGO Movie”, this is undoubtedly a step down. At the cost of its own identity, “Mr. Peabody and Sherman” offers a fun time for the 10 and Under crowd, but the missed opportunity will linger on for the adults in the audience.

“Mr. Peabody & Sherman” opens everywhere on March 7th. See local listings for 3D theaters and show times. Featuring Ty Burrell, Max Charles, Allison Janney, Dennis Haysbert, Stephen Colbert, Leslie Mann, Patrick Warburton, Lake Bell, Stanley Tucci and Mel Brooks. Screenplay by Craig Wright. Directed by Rob Minkoff. Rated “R”

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